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The MBI manifesto

What the world really needs is more Masters of Business Imagination

By **Jim Carroll**
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Enough already!

Complacency in a time of rapid, disruptive change can be a death sentence—not only for growth companies, but for the entrepreneurs who run them. It's time to abandon the sort of thinking that anchors you to the past, time to shift your focus to the future, with enthusiasm, motivation and imagination.

You need to abandon any pretense that the skills of yesterday will be important tomorrow. That means moving beyond the thinking that has led us to a world of MBAs—Masters of Business Administration—and instead focusing on the critical skills you'll need to take you into the future.

The world doesn't need more administrators. It needs more MBIs—Masters of Business Imagination!

The criticality of change

Unprecedented and relentless change defines our era. The emergence of China as a superpower, hyperinnovation and business market turmoil, constant career shifts and rapid scientific advances are just a few examples. Competition changes overnight, and product life cycles often last for just a few months. Permanence has been torn asunder.

In this kind of world, entrepreneurs need a different mindset that can help them focus on growth. The times demand a new agility and flexibility, and everyone needs the skills and insights to prepare for a future rushing at them faster than ever before.

Sadly, most people fall well short in this. They stumble and meander their way into the future, without any firm grasp of how their skills, industry or knowledge is evolving. This leaves them with no idea of what they must do to thrive in an era of rapid change.

Worse yet, they focus on managing, rather than leading. Administering, rather than inspiring. Complying, rather than creating.

They wake up each morning and think, "What happened to the world I knew?" Perhaps that's because their focus is misdirected: they're experts in administration at a time when what they really need is far more imagination.

Growth companies don't move forward with such an attitude. They can only do so if they're driven by progressive, passionate, future-oriented leaders (hopefully, you) who focus on opportunity and creativity to such a degree they can be honoured with the title Masters of Business Imagination.

The elements of an MBI

I'm still working out a detailed curriculum and standards for the MBI. Yet I believe it's possible to identify the core attributes and attitudes that people awarded with the degree possess:

- **They see things differently:** MBIs don't look at things the way most people do. They continuously challenge the assumptions that surround them, using that as the formative fuel for their creativity. They know that the foundation of everything around them is shifting and twisting, and that it is in such movement that the future is being defined. Because they don't believe everything will stay the same, they view the world through a different lens. This helps them generate new ideas, come up with imaginative solutions and continuously think creatively.

- **They spur creativity in other people:** MBIs possess a unique and critical skill: they can spur others around them to develop similar levels of imaginative thinking. They can shake a team out of its administrative complacency, motivating the team's members to rethink and redo, which makes them more valuable to the organization.

- **They focus on opportunities, not threats:** MBIs realize that, if you fail to act, the consequences of continuous disruptive change are bound to be negative. They've learned that they must continuously examine how to turn change into opportunity. They regularly scan for signs of disruptive threat, and rather than viewing them with fear, ask: "Where is the potential here?"

- **They refuse to accept the status quo:** Ogden Nash once wrote that, "Progress is great, but it has gone on far too long." Such stale thinking doesn't drive MBIs. Instead, they look at the world around them and constantly question how they might shake things up. They do so not simply to induce change, but to provide a climate in which people can succeed and excel.

- **They know how to bring ideas to life:** MBIs motivate people to excel by helping spark their creativity in a way that orients it to the future. They paint a picture of where the organization should go and what it will take to get there. They provide forward-oriented goals framed by the change that surrounds them, using this as the fuel to spur their team on to achievement.

- **They constantly replenish their knowledge:** MBIs know we live in a world in which learning has become their job, and just-in-time knowledge has become the foundation for future success. They don't make the dangerous assumption that what they know already will carry them into tomorrow. Instead, they realize that they'll need more knowledge and far more complex skills to do their job in the future. But they see this not as a burden to be endured but an opportunity for continuous learning.

- **They refuse to say the word "can't":** MBIs know that barriers, perceived or otherwise, are just temporary roadblocks they can get around with fresh insight, imaginative analysis and creative thinking.

- **They accept challenges with passion and enthusiasm:** Studies show that many people go to work each day with dread, fear and worry as their constant companions. Once they arrive, they fall into a monotonous routine of meetings, checklists and to-do's. Not MBIs: they approach each day as a new and exciting opportunity. They know the world is wide open for them to use their way of thinking to shake things up, discover opportunity and redefine parameters. Their enthusiasm becomes infectious, to such a degree with the most successful MBIs that they begin to steer the entire organization towards their fresh way of thinking.

- **They listen to people who aren't like them:** MBIs are constantly on the prowl for new ideas and ways of thinking, and understand that the best source may be those who think differently than they do. Examine a team assembled by an MBI and you'll find a highly diverse group of people. They know this kind of team can yield far more creative thinking

than you'd ever get from a group of clones.

- **They live for the opportunity to debate and challenge ideas—including their own:** MBIs truly understand that their own bias, developed through years of experience, can blind them to real opportunity. That makes them eager to have any idea assessed, analyzed and challenged. They encourage debate, knowing that it is through such a process that a simple idea can be turned into a great one.

- **Instead of saying "it won't work," they ask "how can we make it work?":** MBIs don't accept failure as an option. Instead, they constantly work to ensure that goals are achieved. If they don't have what they need to do so, they look for creative and imaginative ways to get around that.

An MBI is the most important business degree for any entrepreneur. Pursue one, and you'll discover a world in which you turn change and challenge into opportunity and success.

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